EARTH SUMMIT
PRESS RELEASE

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

ATOP THE SUMMIT: WORLD LEADERS MEET TO PUSH FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It will be the first global gathering of heads-of-state-and-government on environment and development. It is expected to be the largest meeting of world leaders, non-governmental organizations, business executives, educators, students and grassroots workers. It is taking place at a defining moment in the history of the planet and its people — a time when decisive, urgent and global action is needed to protect the ecological balance of the Earth and secure for its inhabitants an equitable, sustainable future. United Nations Secretary-General Boutrous Boutrous-Ghali has said it might be the "most pivotal and far-reaching" world conference in UN history.

"It" is the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), being held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 3 to 14 June 1992 after more than two years of preparations. Scheduled to coincide with World Environment Day (5 June), the convening of the Earth Summit also marks the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which was held in Stockholm in June 1972.

In the view of Maurice Strong, UNCED Secretary-General, the stakes are high: "Rio 1992 will build on the foundations established in Stockholm in 1972. The people of our planet, especially the young and the generations which follow them, will hold us accountable for what we do or fail to do in Rio. Earth is the only home we have; its fate is literally in our hands."

FROM STOCKHOLM TO RIO

The Stockholm Conference produced a set of principles for ecologically sound management of the planet, inscribed the environment firmly and irrevocably on the world's agenda and led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as the main catalyst for international cooperation on environmental issues. It was also the forum at which world leaders and most other people first discussed development that is both environmentally sustainable and economically progressive and which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

However, in the years that followed, little was done in practical terms to integrate the environmental dimension or the idea of sustainable practices into policies and plans for economic development. At the same time, the global environment continued to deteriorate, and economic and social imbalances between industrialized and developing countries continued to widen.

In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development breathed new life into the concept of sustainable development with the publication of *Our Common Future*, widely known as the Brundtland Report after Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, who chaired the Commission. The landmark report documented in compelling terms the need for sustainable development in both industrialized and developing countries, and also stated that the vastly different conditions under

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which countries must make the transition to sustainability impose special handicaps on the poor and place special responsibilities on the rich. Brundtland suggested that regional and global meetings be held to promote the integration of environment and economic development.

On 22 December 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 44/228 calling for a global meeting on environment and development issues. The Conference, said the Assembly, "should elaborate strategies and measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation in the context of increased national and international efforts to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development in all countries". Thus began the road to Rio, an unprecedented attempt to chart a sustainable and more hopeful course for the future of humanity.

TACKLING THE ISSUES

In seeking a fresh international consensus on issues of global significance, the Rio Conference will address:

- protection of the atmosphere (use of energy, climate change, depletion of the ozone layer, transboundary air pollution);
- protection of land resources (deforestation, desertification, soil loss and drought);
- conservation of biological diversity;
- protection of freshwater resources;
- protection of oceans, seas and coastal areas, and the rational use and development of their living resources;
- environmentally sound management of biotechnology, hazardous wastes and toxic chemicals;
- prevention of illegal traffic in toxic products and wastes;
- improvement in the quality of life and human health;
- improvement in living and working conditions of the poor by eradicating poverty and stopping environmental degradation.

The Conference will also look at underlying patterns of development which cause stress to the environment. Among these are poverty in developing countries, levels of economic growth, unsustainable patterns of consumption, demographic pressures and the impact of the international economy, particularly trade and investment.

To manage this ambitious agenda and oversee preparations for the Conference, a Preparatory Committee was established under the chairmanship of Ambassador Tommy Koh of Singapore. Following an organizational session in March 1990 in New York, the Committee held four substantive sessions (August 1990 in Nairobi, March/April 1991 and August/September 1991 in Geneva, and March/April 1992 in New York) at which three Working Groups and a Plenary analyzed problems and negotiated options for action.

Working Group I, chaired by Bo Kjellen (Sweden) focused on action to protect land, the atmosphere and biological diversity. Working Group II, under the chair of Bukar Shaib (Nigeria), considered options for protecting oceans, seas, coastal areas and freshwater resources and for ensuring the environmentally sound management of wastes. Working Group III, chaired by Bedrich Moldan (Czechoslovakia), considered legal matters and institutional arrangements, both outside and within the UN, needed to monitor the progress of sustainable development. The Committee has met in Plenary to consider "cross-sectoral" issues such as women, finance, technology transfer and the international economic situation.

Assisting the Committee throughout have been background reports prepared by the UNCED secretariat; national reports from more than 120 countries; Working Parties of experts drawn from the UN system and non-governmental organizations (NGOs); all five UN Regional Economic Commissions; UN bodies such as UNEP, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO); and input from groups representing industry, trade unions, women, children, indigenous peoples, the scientific community and others. It has been a painstaking, difficult and often controversial process of analysis, synthesis, report-writing, proposal-making, meeting, negotiation and revision that will culminate, it is hoped, in agreement in Brazil on the main UNCED agenda items.

WHAT WILL COME OUT OF RIO

It is expected that the main outcomes of the Earth Summit will be:

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The Rio Declaration is a set of principles outlining the rights and responsibilities of States towards the environment. The draft approved by consensus at the final meeting of the Preparatory Committee is the only "clean" or unbracketed document forwarded to Rio and represents a tentative global consensus on guidelines for sustainable development. It was originally conceived as an "Earth Charter", a document the industrialized nations believed should stress the need to protect the environment. The "Group of 77" (G-77), as the developing countries are known at the UN, favoured a more detailed proclamation that reflected a greater balance between development and environment and that included a commitment by the developed nations to provide funds and technologies for sustainable development. The compromise draft of the non-legally binding Declaration will be considered again at Rio.

Agenda 21

This 900-page document is a detailed blueprint for action to be taken by Governments, development agencies, UN organizations and independent sectors in all major areas affecting the relationship between the environment and the economy. It focuses on the period up to the year 2000 and extends into the twenty-first century. At the end of the final Preparatory Committee meeting, Maurice Strong called Agenda 21 "the most extensive, comprehensive international programme ever developed and approved, word by word, by Governments". Agenda 21, which will not be legally binding, will be finalized at Rio.

Statement on Forest Principles

At the outset of the UNCED process, it was hoped that a legally-binding convention on forestry would be ready for signature in Rio. However, that goal fell prey to North-South differences when developed countries proposed an agreement focusing on tropical rain forests, while developing countries wanted to include the forests of temperate and boreal latitudes. The work involved in bridging such broad strategic disagreement could not be accomplished in time for Rio. Instead, negotiations by the Preparatory Committee produced a 17-principle statement applying to all types of forests that appears likely to form the basis for post-Summit negotiations on an international forestry convention. The non-legally binding statement will be considered again at Rio.

Negotiations on each of these documents have run into a variety of obstacles, none more contentious or complex than funding and technology transfer.

Funding for sustainable development, particularly for developing countries saddled with heavy external debts, is the most controversial issue. Negotiations during the final session of the Preparatory Committee on the chapter of Agenda 21 devoted to financial resources and mechanisms were unable to produce an agreed-upon text. Differences centred on how much new aid would be made available, how soon donor countries would increase their aid and how funds would be disbursed — through a new funding mechanism or, as the developed countries prefer, through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) — a joint World Bank/UNDP/UNEP project — and other existing mechanisms. UNCED estimates that $125 billion per year in grants or loans will be needed to fund Agenda 21, $70 billion more than current levels of official development assistance (ODA). Aid commitments to be offered at Rio are predicted to be about $5-10 billion per year.

There is no dispute over the fact that developing countries need access to existing and newly created pollution prevention technologies, both proprietary and those not covered by patents, if they are to make the transition to sustainable development. But differences remain between developing countries seeking access to such technology on preferential or concessional terms, and industrialized countries concerned about protecting intellectual property rights. One proposal in Agenda 21 calls for the creation of an international code of conduct on technology transfer.

Conventions on Climate Change and Biological Diversity

In separate processes linked to UNCED, the UN is negotiating international treaties which would legally bind Governments to reduce global warming and conserve biological diversity. Whether or not these texts will be ready for signature in Rio depends on the outcome of current negotiating sessions. No further negotiations on these treaties will be held in Rio.

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) for a Framework Convention on Climate Change ended its fifth session in New York on 9 May with agreement on key issues that had earlier impeded the talks. Governments agreed to limit emissions of greenhouse gases and protect and enhance greenhouse gas sinks and reservoirs, "with the aim of returning individually or jointly to their 1990 levels these emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases". Earlier language had set a deadline of the year 2000 for accomplishing this goal. Many developing countries and environmentalists objected to the weaker language, while those in favour of the compromise stressed that this "constructive ambiguity" would contribute to the overall process of controlling global warming. Negotiators also agreed to establish a fund to address climate change issues, to be operated by the GEF on an interim basis, and to language covering technology transfer.

The INC for a Convention on Biological Diversity was scheduled to hold its sixth negotiating session in Nairobi from 11 to 19 May. Negotiators will be seeking agreement on several important issues on which differences remain. The most significant of these is financial aid for developing countries. Negotiators are said to be hoping that the talks on climate change can arrive at a solution that can be emulated.

Other sticking points include the terms by which developed countries will have access to genetic materials and biological resources found mostly in tropical forests in developing countries; the terms by which developing countries will have access to conservation technology and new technologies based on or developed from materials and resources found in tropical forests; and the control and ownership of patent and intellectual property rights for biotechnology and forest resource products.

THE FINAL RUN-UP TO RIO

The conclusion of the Preparatory Committee's work has turned most eyes towards Rio. Still, meetings being held during the final two-month run-up to the Earth Summit continue to contribute greatly to the UNCED process.

The Brundtland Commission reconvened in London in mid-April for its first session since publication of *Our Common Future* and urged world leaders to attend the Earth Summit to "inspire present generations with an ethic of caring for the planet" and to take a number of "clear and unavoidable" steps at Rio. Among the Commission's recommendations: sign the Framework Convention on Climate Change, launch negotiations for additional conventions covering forests and desertification, initiate a "massive attack on mass poverty", write down commercial bank debt, move to open trade and increase funding for sustainable development. Prime Minister Brundtland said that if the opportunity created by UNCED were lost, it would amount to an unparalleled abdication of duty.

Also in mid-April, former Japanese Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita hosted the "Eminent Persons' Meeting on Financing Global Environment and Development", held in Tokyo. A declaration issued at the close of that session endorsed the major proposals of Agenda 21, particularly those calling for immediate increases in funding for capacity-building and technology transfer, for changes in fiscal and taxation policies and for strengthening the GEF. The statement called for Japanese "leadership in global environment and development cooperation commensurate with its growing weight in the world economy". Japan is expected to make a significant, specific contribution to the financial arrangements decided upon in Rio.

Restructuring the GEF was the topic when thirty-two Governments, about half from developing countries, met later in the month in Washington, D.C. Chairman Mohamed T. El-Ashry said that the changes

discussed at the meeting, particularly those involving developing country participation in GEF decision-making, opened the door for the successful completion of negotiations on the climate change and biodiversity conventions. The GEF also announced that it would fund "country driven" programmes and projects in addition to global problems, and that it would finance activities in areas such as desertification and deforestation that related to GEF's four main areas of concentration (global warming, biodiversity, international waters and ozone layer depletion).

Finally, ministers from 55 developing countries met in late April in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for the Second Ministerial Conference of Developing Countries on Environment and Development. Observers from 11 developed countries also attended. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration noted the developing countries' "serious concern at the lack of progress" on key issues such as financial resources and mechanisms and also on the climate change convention. The ministers reiterated their call for a "specific and separate" fund to finance Agenda 21 and stated that the concept of technology transfer should not be "diluted by referring to it as technology cooperation."

FOLLOW-UP TO THE SUMMIT

These and other talks and symposia have pointed the way not only to the Earth Summit but to the post-Rio world as well. The institutional follow-up to UNCED is also being discussed in the context of Agenda 21. Negotiations have focused on two alternatives for the UN's post-Summit responsibilities in monitoring implementation of Agenda 21:

1) A Sustainable Development Commission, made up of elected Member States, reporting directly to the General Assembly on matters of substance and through the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on coordination; or

2) A new committee of ECOSOC set up specifically to deal with sustainable development which would also, through the Council, report to the General Assembly.

There will have to be extraordinary cooperation between Governments, NGOs, the private sector, the financial community and other constituencies to put Agenda 21 into effect. While the Earth Summit will constitute a test of nations' willingness to institute fundamental changes in economic behaviour, the challenges ahead will be perhaps far more daunting.

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